

January 26, 2022

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow, Chair  
Senate Agriculture, Nutrition, & Forestry  
Committee  
328A Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC, 20510

The Honorable Robert Scott, Chair  
House Education & Labor Committee  
2176 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC, 20515

The Honorable John Boozman, Ranking  
Member  
Senate Agriculture, Nutrition, & Forestry  
Committee  
328A Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC, 20510

The Honorable Virginia Foxx, Ranking  
Member  
House Education & Labor Committee  
2101 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC, 20515

Dear Chairwoman Stabenow, Chairman Scott, Ranking Member Boozman, and Ranking Member Foxx,

On behalf of the below national, state, and local organizations, we encourage the House Committee on Education and Labor and the Senate Agriculture, Nutrition & Forestry Committee to consider the inclusion of the bipartisan Improving Mental Health and Wellness in Schools Act ([H.R. 5526/S. 2930](#)) within upcoming child nutrition reauthorization legislation as mental health is a vital component of overall wellbeing of our nation's K-12 students.

Over the past year, school personnel have adapted to the COVID-19 pandemic in various ways to support students continued learning. Despite their best efforts, the consistent high levels of youth stress and anxiety continue to permeate their lives. Specifically, pediatric emergency room admissions for mental health conditions have increased 25 percent.<sup>1</sup> Adolescent eating disorder diagnoses have increased 30 percent year over year.<sup>2</sup> Food insecurity skyrocketed, which increases the risk of anxiety and depression by 257 percent and 253 percent respectively.<sup>3</sup> We know that food insecure households also have higher rates of disordered eating behaviors, which can heighten the risk for an eating disorder.<sup>4</sup> It is clear the pandemic will have lifelong effects on our nation's children.

The interdependence of mental health and nutrition plays a vital role in child development. As Dr. Lee Savio Beers, President of the American Academy of Pediatrics stated within her testimony in front of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry earlier this year, food insecurity and scarcity can

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<sup>1</sup> Leeb RT, Bitsko RH, Radhakrishnan L, Martinez P, Njai R, Holland KM. Mental Health-Related Emergency Department Visits Among Children <18 Years During the COVID-19 Pandemic—United States, January 1–October 17, 2020. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep 2020;69:1675;1680. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6945a3e>.

<sup>2</sup> Tanner, Lindsay. (May 23, 2021). Pandemic has fueled eating disorder surge in teens, adults. Associated Press. Retrieved. <http://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-virus-lifestyle-eating-disorders-health-27c9d5680980b1452f7e512bd4d9f825>

<sup>3</sup> Fang, D., Thomsen, M.R. & Nayga, R.M. The association between food insecurity and mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. BMC Public Health 21, 607 (2021) <http://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-021-10631-0>

<sup>4</sup> University Relations News Service, "Research Brief: Food Insecurity Raised Risk for Disordered Eating in Low-Income Adolescents," University of Minnesota Twin Cities (University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, August 13, 2020), <https://twin-cities.umn.edu/news-events/research-brief-food-insecurity-raised-risk-disordered-eating-low-income-adolescents>.

lead to increased risk for disordered eating.<sup>5</sup> Dr. Savio Beers also commented that her colleagues have seen an increase in severe eating disorders that are starting at even younger ages given the strains of the pandemic.<sup>6</sup> Physical and mental health can no longer be addressed in silos within school programming. The upcoming reauthorization provides the Committee the timely opportunity to mend this disconnection.

The bipartisan, bicameral Improving Mental Health and Wellness in Schools Act seeks to update the current mental health gap in Local School Wellness policies by adding mental health promotion and education elements into existing policies. Additionally, the bill includes technical assistance from SAMHSA to assist USDA in the integration of mental health within Local School Wellness Policies. This will ensure school personnel are adequately equipped to meet the mental health needs of their students.

We thank you for your consideration of this request to protect our nation's students' mental and physical health through the advancement of the Improving Mental Health and Wellness in Schools Act. We look forward to continuing to work with you during this process.

Sincerely,

American Psychological Association

Academy for Eating Disorders

Academy for Nutrition and Dietetics

Afterschool Alliance

AIDS Alliance for Women, Infants, Children, Youth & Families

Alaska Eating Disorders Alliance

Ames Psychological Wellness Center

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, Missouri Chapter

American School Health Association

Aquatic Engineering Consultants

Be Real USA

Children's Health Fund

Committee for Children

Council of Administrators of Special Education

Eating Disorders Coalition for Research, Policy & Action

Eating Disorders Resource Center

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<sup>5</sup> Child Nutrition Reauthorization: Healthy Means and Healthy Futures: Hearing before the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition & Forestry, 117<sup>th</sup> Cong. (2021) (Testimony of Dr. Lee Savio Beers).

[https://www.agriculture.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Testimony\\_Beers%2003.25.21.pdf](https://www.agriculture.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Testimony_Beers%2003.25.21.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

EDGE Consulting Partners  
Green Dot Public Schools National  
Healthy Schools Campaign  
Inseparable  
International Federation of Eating Disorder Dietitians  
Lynn Moore Counseling  
Missouri Eating Disorder Council  
More to Life Nutrition Counseling, LLC  
National Alliance for Eating Disorders  
National Association of Elementary School Principals  
National Association of School Psychologists  
National Association of Secondary School Principals  
National Center of Excellence for Eating Disorders (NCEED)  
National Eating Disorders Association  
National PTA  
Project HEAL  
Sandy Hook Promise  
SHAPE America: The Society of Health and Physical Educators  
Strategic Training Initiative for the Prevention of Eating Disorders (STRIPED)  
Suicide Awareness Voices of Education (SAVE)  
The School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA)  
Uhl Therapy Services  
United Health  
Washington University School of Medicine, Center for Healthy Weight and Wellness  
Waukee Equity, Inclusion, and Support  
With All  
YourMomCares